

# Toronto Torah

## Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Acharei Mot

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in honour of the yahrtzeit of Max Guttman ב"ה שמואל ז"ל

### Saving Lives on Shabbat

**Idan Rakovsky**

The many laws of our parshah include the verse, "You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live" (Vayikra 18:5, Artscroll tr.) The Talmud (Yoma 85b) learns from this that we must live by the mitzvot, rather than die by them. Therefore, in almost all circumstances we may not sacrifice our lives in order to perform mitzvot. For example, we save lives even at the expense of observing Shabbat. [See also Sanhedrin 94a and Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shabbat 2:3.]

This leads to a question which has been much-discussed over the centuries: should a Jew violate Shabbat to save a life if the patient will not "live by the mitzvot," because the patient is not Jewish? The question is exacerbated by concern that the patient may go on to defy G-d by worshipping idols, as well as to attack Jews. [See Rabbeinu Yonah cited in Beit Yosef Yoreh Deah 154.]

Halachic authorities universally agree that the answer is to violate Shabbat to save all lives, even though this will not be a case of the patient "living by the mitzvot". [See, for example, *Igrot Moshe* Orach Chaim 4:79 and *Shemirat Shabbat k'Hilchatah* 40:14 (42).] Rationales include the appreciation of the value of all civilized life (*Meiri* Yoma 84b, *Mitzpeh Aryeh* II Orach Chaim 10), the importance of preserving positive and safe human relations (*Chatam Sofer* Yoreh Deah 131), the recognition that contemporary medical practice requires treating all patients (*Tzitz Eliezer* 8:5:6), and more.

One modern debate is of particular interest, though – a 1999 [correspondence](#) between Rabbi Avichai Rontzki, Chief Military Rabbi of the IDF, and Yosef Achituv, an educator and important thinker of the *Kibbutz Hadati* (Religious Kibbutz) movement. This correspondence opens a window into an important debate about Halachah and ethics.

It began when Rabbi Rontzki wrote, in discussing the question we outlined above, "If it is possible to evade and not treat him, that must be done." (*Halachah during War*, 1996) His ultimate conclusion was to help, but only in order to avoid retaliation against Jews.

This answer angered Yosef Achituv. In a letter to Rabbi Rontzki, he wrote, "I don't find [in your writing] any hint that there is a value in a non-Jew's life, and that it in itself deserves to have any weight in halachic considerations."

Rabbi Rontzki replied: "Are we not committed, with an absolute commitment, to the laws of Torah, even when in human eyes some judgments may seem immoral?" He brought sources to support his answer, including some of those we cited above.

But Yosef Achituv shifted the discussion from the halachic question to the ethical and philosophical question, writing: "I must say that such arguments, which are common among many halachic authorities, negate Rabbi Kook's words in *Orot haKodesh*, that 'a sign of pure awe of G-d is when the natural morality em-

bedded in human nature rises even higher [because of that awe] than it did without it.' When that does not happen, 'such reverence is invalid.'" Moreover, Achituv argued that even if most halachic authorities agreed that one should not violate Shabbat in order to save the life of a non-Jew, there was precedent for dissent in the Religious Zionist world, specifically. Most halachic authorities had opposed Religious Zionism for generations!

Rabbi Rontzki, who was also the Rosh Yeshiva in Itamar and a teacher of Rabbi Kook's Torah, replied that Rabbi Kook's argument was philosophical, and should not affect a halachic calculation. As for the readiness of Religious Zionism to break with the majority, he distinguished between dealing with new questions, for which the consensus could be questioned, and dealing with old issues like medical care on Shabbat.

The halachic position on saving all lives on Shabbat is well-established, but the debate between Rabbi Rontzki and Yosef Achituv remains. How does our moral view affect our understanding of what Hashem wants of us? This is a vital question for every Jew.

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**Summary**

At the end of the previous chapter, Yehoyakim was installed as the king of Yehudah by Necho, the king of Egypt. This chapter begins with the ascension of another regional power, Babylon. The Babylonians take control of much of the region and Yehoyakim ends up becoming their vassal for a period of three years. After this he rebels, possibly intending to restore ties with Egypt. (24:1)

G-d keeps the promise He made through the prophets to destroy the kingdom of Yehudah. He sends the armies of all the Jews' old enemies to attack, including Aram, Amon, and Moav. All of this happens because of the sins of Menasheh and the innocent blood that he spilled in Jerusalem. (2-4)

Yehoyakim dies and is replaced by his son Yehoyachin, who maintains the evil practices of his predecessors. (6, 9) [The transition is less clear in Divrei haYamim II 36:6-8, which describes Nevuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, removing Yehoyakim from Israel.]

We are told that Yehudah can no longer rely on Egypt for protection. The Babylonians have conquered much of the Egyptians' territory, so that Egypt's re-

gional influence is much reduced. (7)

The Babylonians return to Jerusalem, apparently to punish Yehudah for a rebellion which is not described in the text. Yehoyachin, his family, and the prominent members of the society are exiled to Babylon. The army is dismantled, and the treasuries of both the king and the Temple are taken. (10-16)

The Babylonian king Nevuchadnezzar appoints King Tzidkiyahu in charge of a still intact Jerusalem. Tzidkiyahu continues the evil practices of Yehoyakim and the other kings. He also rebels against Babylon, bringing on Yehudah's final destruction. (17-20)

For more, see Divrei haYamim II 36.

**Analysis**

The chapter highlights G-d's desire to punish Yehudah and bring about the end of the kingdom. This is why G-d destabilizes Yehoyakim's reign. Further, as explained by Rashi and Radak (24:20), G-d compels Tzidkiyahu to rebel against Babylon, against his better interests. This is reminiscent of G-d hardening Pharaoh's heart. Why did G-d choose to remove the possibility of repentance at this point?

An answer lies in the other phenomenon that's highlighted in the chapter, Yehudah's absolute descent into spiritual and moral corruption. Before Yehoyakim's reign, the leadership in Yehudah had moved back and forth between corruption and righteousness. Chizkiyahu attempted to right the wrongs of his father Achaz, and Yoshiyahu did the same for his grandfather Menasheh and father Amon. In this chapter we see that this tension dissipated. Despite all of Yoshiyahu's reforms, Yehoyakim went straight back to the practices of Menasheh. The kings who came after him followed in this path as well.

We find the same pattern on the social plane as well. The text mentions the innocent blood that Menashe spilled in Jerusalem. Rabbi David Altschuler (*Metzudat David*) comments that this isn't referring to people Menasheh killed directly. Rather, Menasheh's regime made murder a regular practice in society, and so all of the subsequent murder is attributed to him.

The spiritual and moral rot had reached the core of Judean society. This made the tragic end inevitable.

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Many classes are off this week—but the opportunities below are ON!**

**Monday-Thursday**

**10:00 AM - Noon: Adult Seder Boker with Rabbi Moshe Yeres on Zoom at <http://tiny.cc/sederboker> (men)**

**Shabbat Apr 29-30**

**After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT: Gruda Beis Medrash (men)**

**Sunday May 1 Rosh Chodesh Iyar**

**10 AM Learning In Memory of Fallen IDF Soldiers z"l, at Yeshivat Or Chaim  
Sign up at <http://tiny.cc/yomhazikaron>; Refreshments served; In tandem with Mizrachi Canada**

**Monday May 2 Rosh Chodesh Iyar**

**Prepare for Yom haZikaron, Yom ha'Atzmaut & Yom Yerushalayim, in tandem with Mizrachi Canada, at BAYT  
8-8:45 PM Short chaburot about each of these special days / 8:45 PM-9:30 PM Panel on Religious Zionism**

**Tuesday May 3**

**1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, King Solomon's Arc, Shaarei Shomayim & ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>**

**7:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 14-15), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (men)**

**Wednesday May 4 Yom haZikaron**

**10:00 AM R' Mordechai Torczyner, S. Y. Agnon's "Circles of Justice" #1 of 3—NEW SERIES!  
Fee: \$30; Register at <https://torontotorah.com/wednesdays>; On ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>**

**Thursday May 5 Yom ha'Atzmaut**

**1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 25), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (women)**

**Friday May 6**

**10:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, R' Mordechai Torczyner, R' Yehuda Mann, Bava Batra Perek 2 advanced  
In-person in our Beit Midrash at 159 Almore Ave, on Zoom at <http://tiny.cc/frishiur>**